DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 189 SP 031 547

TITLE	Report of the Laboratory Review Panel on the 1987 Review of Laboratories.
INSTITUTION	University Research Corp., Bethesda, Md.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	6 Oct 87
NOTE	20p.; For other documents related to the Regional Educational Laboratory recompetition of 1990, see SP 031 546-556.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Agency Cooperation; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *Institutional Mission; *Linking Agents; Long Range Planning; Needs Assessment; Program Effectiveness; *Regional Laboratories; *Research and Development; *Resource Allocation
IDENTIFIERS	*Regional Educational Laboratories

ABSTRACT

This document reports on the 1987 external review of the nine Regional Educational Laboratories which evaluated lab performance during the first 18-20 months of their contracts and evaluated their plans for the remaining 3 years of the contracts. Observations about lab plans are presented on a program-wide basis. It is reported that the 3-5 year plans developed by the labs leave questions for the review panel about the overall clarity and vision of the labs' missions. This appears to led to uncertainty in the area of programmatic decision-making. The way in which labs set priorities was seen as not always clear. Some labs have experienced a profound shift of identity and purpose from being developer and provider of research and development to that of a linking agency, working primarily with and through other educational service agencies. The following questions are discussed: (1) Are the labs to be pro-active or reactive within their regions? (2) To what extent should regional labs also have some national identity? and (3) Are the intended degree and benefits of collaboration among the labs being achieved? Recommendations are made regarding the future of the program. (JD)

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ED308189

REPORT OF THE LABORATORY REVIEW PANEL ON THE 1987 REVIEW OF LABORATORIES

October 6, 1987

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SP 031 547

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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October 5, 1987

Dr. Chester E. Finn, Jr.
Assistant Secretary and
Counselor to the Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Checker:

The report of the Laboratory Review Panel on the review of Regional Educational Labs is forwarded to you.

The Panel is pleased to have had the opportunity to comment on the review. As noted in the report, we believe the review was conducted very competently, and that the results will be beneficial to the labs and to OERI.

We have focused, for the most part, on program-wide issues in our report. We have utilized the opportunity to draw upon all of the reports on individual labs to help identify issues for your consideration.

You will see, however, that we have some specific recommendations and observations regarding three individual labs. In our judgement, these matters warrant special attention. We hope you will consider these recommendations, as well as the others, and advise us at an appropriate time of any actions taken with respect to these matters.

I would be pleased to speak with you to discuss this report, as would Joy Frechtling and Garry McDaniels, other Panel members who are in this area.

The Panel plans to meet three times per year hereafter on a regular basis. Our agenda from here forward will concentrate on monitoring the results of the review, discussion of forthcoming evaluation activities, and providing input to policy regarding the future of the program.

If you have suggestions about how the Panel may be of further assistance to you, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Christopher T. Cross
Chairman
Laboratory Review Panel

CTC/ab

REPORT OF THE LABORATORY REVIEW PANEL
ON THE 1987 EXTERNAL REVIEW OF LABORATORIES

I. Observations About the Review Process -

In the summer of 1987, OERI conducted an external peer review of the nine regional educational labs. The purpose of the review was to evaluate lab performance during the first 18-20 months of their contracts and also to evaluate their plans for the remaining three years of the contracts.

A team of external reviewers, accompanied by the cognizant OERI institutional liaison (IL), visited each lab for two and one-half days. The teams had been trained in Washington for two days prior to the on-site visits. The teams read the labs' 3-5 year plans and other documents necessary for their work. Standardized evaluation criteria had been developed for review of both lab performance and plans.

While on-site, the teams met with lab board members, management and staff. The teams also contacted selected lab clients and constituents by telephone to determine their perceptions of the labs' performance. The review was conducted within relatively short timelines and with relatively limited resources.

The panel has compiled information about the review from several sources: (a) reports from review teams and OERI institutional liaisons (IL's); (b) meetings with the review team leaders, IL's and lab executive directors; (c) written comments from the executive directors concerning their reviews; (d) visits to a lab by most panel members while a site visit was in progress; and (e) review of lab 3-5 year plans and needs assessments. In addition, the panel chair briefly observed the review teams' training and spoke to the reviewers.

Before proceeding with detailed comments on the review, the panel has some preliminary observations to make about its overall nature and findings. The OERI design generated much factual information about specific aspects of lab performance and plans. Reviewers absorbed a great deal of written and oral information about the labs and their reports are very factual.

The review generated relatively little information about external considerations in the labs' environments. For example, while information is available about constituents' and clients' perceptions of the labs, there is not documented evidence about labs' effects in the regions. Nor did the review address such a question as: "Is this the optimal arrangement of service improvement organizations in the regions?" OERI staff did not see the review as capable of addressing such broader issues. It plans to address such issues in other parts of its lab evaluation plan. The panel concurs with the OERI position in this regard.

Detailed comments on the review process follow.

The review was exceptionally well organized and implemented. In particular:

- The reviewers were broadly representative of lab constituent groups. They were selected as a result of a wide search process which included requests for nominations from a larger number of professional organizations and other sources. The reviewers therefore brought a fresh view to the evaluation of labs. The panel regards this outreach positively.

- OERI spent considerable time and effort in preparing and training the reviewers. These preparations apparently provided teams with a common understanding of the purposes and criteria for the review. Room for appropriate discretion was nonetheless left for review teams regarding the details of individual reviews. Reviewers were motivated and industrious while on-site.

- The reviewers were sensitive to the issues faced in the labs. Their backgrounds provided them with relevant perspectives with which to do their job.

- Communication from OERI to the labs about the review was good. Information about procedures, criteria and schedules was communicated to the labs in advance. This apparently facilitated understanding and acceptance of the review by the labs.

- The labs were very open to the review process. They responded to questions and provided information freely and, in general, treated the review as a learning opportunity.

- The OERI institutional liaisons (IL's) played a key role in the review. They provided historical and Departmental perspectives about the labs which would otherwise not have been available to the panel. They also provided an additional source of information on numerous key issues. This information helped the panel "triangulate" data sources and perspectives in its work.

With hindsight, some things might be done differently. We recommend the following changes in any future reviews:

- Reviewers be given examplars of critical characteristics of "good labs" against which to make comparisons.

- Each team should review more than one lab. The teams in this review did not have such cross-cutting assignments or membership. This prevented reviewers from having more than one basis for making judgments about lab performance and plans. In general, the panel believes there is a tendency for reviews of this type to produce positive results. Institutions being reviewed find it helpful to have a person to talk with, explain one's programs, etc. This does not mean the results from this review are to be disbelieved, but the tendency for positive findings to result from such a process should be kept in mind.

- The panel received relatively little information about the quality or impact of lab products. The panel recommends further information about this topic be developed in the future. If not done through such a review, it should be done through other means.

- Consideration should be given to paying reviewers. In this case, the teams did a tremendous amount of work, even going beyond the number of days they nominally agreed to serve. However, some of them had reservations about non-payment and it is unlikely that many of them would volunteer to perform the same service on an unpaid basis again. This would impair OERI's ability to obtain consistency in review teams over time. (Further, non-payment would have been a severe barrier in this case to any attempt by OERI to have teams review more than one lab.)

Taking into account all the observations and caveats above, the panel considers this review exemplary and credible in light of the time and resources available.

II. Observations About the 3-5 Year Plans

The panel wishes to frame its observations about lab plans drawn from this review on a program-wide basis. It believes that such a perspective can best complement the laboratory-specific orientation of the external review teams.

The panel does not believe it has sufficient information to qualify review team's findings about individual laboratories' performance. It believes more information about lab impact from the field is desirable. The panel will say, however, that it has no evidence of gross discrepancies between labs' stated commitments and performance to date.

This section will therefore comment on program-wide issues and considerations which have been raised through the panel's discussions of and participation in the review. The panel believes these are generally unresolved matters and warrant the Assistant Secretary's attention.

The panel thinks regards the present level of effort being expended by OERI and the developing nature of its relationships with the labs postively. The panel is not under any illusions that the relationships are trouble-free. But it believes (particularly its members who are knowledgeable about prior administrative arrangements within NIE/OERI) that the assignment of individual OERI staff for major parts of their time as institutional liaisons, together with focused OERI management attention to the program, is praiseworthy.

Incorporation in the program of the indirect services strategy (working with and through intermediaries) is a significant development in the labs' history. The strategy has affected the kind of work the labs conduct. It also has implications for the appropriate way to evaluate labs' work. The panel does not believe the full implications of this

strategy are understood as yet. More detailed comments on this topic are found below.

Unresolved Issues and Considerations

The 3-5 year plans developed by the labs leave questions for the panel about the overall clarity and vision of the labs' missions- On average, the lab 3-5 year plans and accompanying needs assessments were about 400 pages per institution. This often made it difficult for the panel to get a clear picture of what a lab is doing. Stylistically, executive summaries of the plans might help. Alternatively, the entire plans could simply be written more succinctly.

In particular, the panel frequently found it hard to get a clear idea of what overall sense of mission drove the lab plans. For example, whether a lab sought to better enable its constituencies to handle change on their own, to "gap fill" with needed services, or to act as a disseminator of information within its region (or some combination of these) was not always clear. Ironically, the extensive amount of verbiage in the plans did not help with this problem.

The panel believes one by-product of such lack of clarity is that it is difficult to set reasonable expectations for lab performance. As a corollary observation, the panel believes the labs' self assessments may be relatively stronger in assessing specific activity-level performance and weaker in assessing program-wide or institutional performance, especially impact.

There is an additional observation by the review teams which the panel believes may be related to its perception of lack of clarity and vision in the labs' missions and their role in the school improvement process. That observation was sometimes ambiguous internal guidelines in use by labs for determining when to offer or refuse services to constituents when requested, and when to stop services once started. Lack of a larger vision of a laboratory's mission may in part lead to uncertainty in this area of programmatic decision-making.

The way in which labs set priorities is not always clear- The panel notes that extensive needs assessments have been done to help guide the lab 3-5 year plans. The level of effort expended and amounts of data obtained in this area are high. But the panel frequently did not see the relationships between needs assessment data and the choice of programs or strategies made by the labs.

In part, the difficulty in establishing such relationships lay with the complexity of the labs documentation, discussed above. In part, the difficulty lay with the complicated nature of the needs assessment data themselves. The data would in many cases support numerous strategies and programs, more in fact, than the lab could ever hope to respond to. In such cases, the reasons underlying the actual choices made about whom to serve were not always clear.

Stated differently, the panel believes there may be patterns of service allocation to different populations and areas of their regions made by the labs which can not be predicted by the needs assessment data and which may not reflect any other stated premises. The panel recommends more succinct information be presented in the future regarding reasons for adoption of lab strategies and allocation of services.

In a similar vein, some plans contain commendable statements of regional context considerations, in part, we understand, in response to OERI requests. But it is not always clear that the actual choice of programs undertaken by a lab has any direct relationship to the context considerations described. One lab, for example, noted the severe economic considerations in its region, but its programs did not deal directly with finance issues, or how schools in its region might deal with budgetary crises. Greater synergy between contextual considerations outlined in the plans and the plans themselves is desirable.

The implications of the indirect service ("with and through") strategies need further examination- The panel vigorously sought information about how indirect service strategies are working in the labs. These strategies are clearly a major aspect of the labs' programming. The panel believes the labs have established networks where they did not exist before as a result of the strategies. It also believes the labs serve clients through existing networks as well. But the impact of indirect service strategies is felt not only with respect to work performed specifically under Task Two of the contracts (where the provision is contained), but also with regard to how a lab perceives of itself as a institution. In the latter regard, some labs have experienced a profound shift of identity and purpose from being a developer and provider of R&D to that of a linking agency, working primarily with and through other educational service agencies.

The following specific aspects of the indirect service strategies are highlighted for consideration.

- There needs to be a better understanding of the range of partners with whom labs might work and which choices are most efficacious.

- Indirect service strategies have different implications in different type regions (e.g., for the Far West Lab's, where there are many intermediaries and the Appalachia Lab's, where there are relatively few).

- The lab RFP states acceptable conditions under which labs may work directly at the local level. In general, these guidelines appear to have been followed. In most cases, for example, labs do not appear to define building level personnel as a primary type of client. There are individual cases, however, where a lab is working directly at the local level in which it is not clear that it has a mandate to do so. Some clarification of these guidelines as they relate to the 3-5 year plans may be desirable.

- The strategies may subject labs to uncontrollable influences. For example, the Governor of California recently cancelled a program of

technical assistance centers with which the Far West Laboratory was working as part of its indirect services. This development has required reprogramming by the lab.

- The 1985 recompetition resulted in a transition of labs from institutions which conducted some significant R&D on their own, to ones providing assistance services, primarily in partnerships with others. While the change has clear benefits, one cost is the loss of practitioner-oriented R&D that labs used to conduct. In part, this transition makes the choice of the R&D that labs incorporate in their services more critical. Based on knowledge presently available to it, the panel is not sure that there is a sufficient locus of practitioner-oriented research emanating from other sources which the labs may draw upon.

- As indicated earlier, the panel believes more information about lab impact is desirable. But while the ultimate goal of labs is school and classroom improvement, it isn't clear that looking for such outcomes is the appropriate criterion for a lab using indirect service strategies, except in given situations where there is a discernible linkage between services delivered by the lab and the ultimate school beneficiaries. Such situations are probably the exception rather than the rule. Further attention to this issue is warranted.

Are the labs to be pro-active or reactive within their regions? The panel perceives an issue which appears to be unresolved regarding the labs' role in their regions: the degree to which they are to be pro-active in identifying areas for involvement and taking leadership in those areas, and the degree to which they should be "constituent-driven".

This issue reflects facets of the other issues which have preceded it in this section of the report, i.e., whether the labs have an overall vision of their mission, whether their needs assessments are adequate and their programs related to them, and the implications of the indirect service strategies for the institutions. But new considerations are raised as well.

On the one hand, when a lab has a clear sense of constituent needs and follows them, it will presumably play a useful role in its region. But its programs may be changing and unrecognizable from one year to the next. On the other hand, if a lab stakes out leadership in an area, it risks both political backlash and changing priorities which may render its capabilities and agenda obsolete.

In this regard, the panel notes that some labs have identified areas in which they are particularly strong. That is good; however, a team in one case has reported that the lab had a tendency to diagnose or interpret client problems in terms of a school improvement area in which it had particular expertise and then frame its services in that area.

As indicated, the pro-active/reactive issue is but one aspect of others raised here, perhaps most strongly, that of what is the larger vision labs have of their mission. The panel believes the labs must strike a

balance between being pro-active and reactive. It is not sure such a balance is understood or has been achieved among the labs.

To what degree should regional labs also have some national identity? The panel has inquired about the extent to which labs perceive themselves as being oriented entirely to their regions, or whether they have, or should have, some national identity or outlook as well.

The panel's perception is that the labs are very strongly oriented to their regions. This is a strength. On the other hand, there are some legitimate roles outside the region which labs might become involved with.

Appropriate national visibility and orientation can be achieved through national recruitment and staffing of labs' key positions. Participation in appropriate national professional activities is also appropriate. Laboratories do these things. One important national role might be to exert leadership in one or more areas of school improvement. This might be done through original collaborative arrangements with parties outside, as well as within, the labs' regions. Collaboration will be discussed below.

One aspect of the labs' role which the panel finds troubling is an apparent lack of concerted effort by either OERI or the institutions to develop a general plan for fostering collaboration with other R&D resources funded by the Department of Education. The panel has identified numerous assistance activities funded by the Department, with whom the labs might collaborate. These are shown on Table 1 (following page).

The panel believes more collaboration can be achieved between labs and other Departmentally-funded resources and strongly urges that appropriate action be taken to bring about such collaboration.

Collaboration among labs - The panel questions whether the intended degree and benefits of collaboration among the labs are being achieved. The 1985 RFP stipulated that labs should "work in collaboration with centers and with other labs on regional and national educational problems". Laboratories are to allocate ten percent of their budgets to collaboration under Task Five to participate in activities that "address more than one region or are nationwide in scope". Specific Task Five activities may include:

a) exchange of information on R&D needs and practices through meetings, newsletters or electronic networks;

b) development of resources for improvement, e.g., syntheses, training modules, workshop designs;

c) engagement in collaborative improvement efforts across regions;

d) assisting OERI in understanding needs of educational practitioners in regions and nationwide;

Table 1

OTHER ASSISTANCE RESOURCES FUNDED
BY THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
WITH WHOM REGIONAL LABORATORIES MIGHT COLLABORATE

Office/Activity	Funding ($ in millions)
Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)	
Educational Research Centers (18)	17.8
ERIC Clearinghouses (16)	4.8
National Diffusion Network (NDN) State Facilitators (53)	4.8
Leadership in Educational Administration Development (LEAD) Program Centers (51)	7.1
Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE)	
Chapter I Technical Assistance Centers (4)	3.6
Indian Education- Regional Resource Centers (5)	2.2
Drug Free Schools Centers (5)	8.8
Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS)	
Regional Resource Centers (5)	2.2
Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA)	
Multi-Functional Resource Centers (16)	10.0
Evaluation Assistance Centers (2)	0.7
Bilingual Education Clearinghouse	1.0

Table 1 (continued)

OTHER ASSISTANCE RESOURCES FUNDED
BY THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
WITH WHOM REGIONAL LABORATORIES MIGHT COLLABORATE

Civil Rights (OCR)	
Desegregation Assistance Centers (10)	8.2
Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE)	
National Center for Research on Vocational Education (NCRVE)	6.0
Community Coordination Centers (6)	0.8
Total Funding	78.0

The regional offices of the Department (Secretary's Regional Representatives) are also resources with whom the labs might work.

e) cooperating in work in national research, development, dissemination and improvement problems jointly identified by the lab and OERI.

A central coordinating group was described in the RFP that would be convened by OERI in consultation with the labs. It would determine guidelines, procedures and priorities and would involve assignments to cross-laboratory task forces for planning and implementation. An annual meeting of lab governing board chairs, executive directors and OERI was also envisioned.

Nine "theme areas" emerged from lab plans in FY '86. Three of these were administrative in nature, including electronic networking and evaluation. The electronic networking has occurred as envisioned and some effective collaboration on substantive themes, e.g., higher order thinking skills, the urban education network, state policy and rural education. Collaboration in other areas, however, has lagged and except for two of the above areas, content-based products have not been developed as yet.

OERI staff have reported several difficulties with Task Five implementation to date. One concerns laboratory leadership for specific themes. There is a lack of balance and consistency among labs in taking leadership for themes. Some labs have taken the lead in more than one area and at least one has not taken the lead in any. Lead labs cannot force other labs to cooperate and lead lab leadership is very fragile; it sometimes does not emerge and is usually highly person-dependent.

It has been difficult to identify the overall dimensions of Task Five because the work in the labs often overlaps that in other tasks.

OERI staff have made the following recommendations regarding the implementation of Task Five:

1) The notion of the "lead lab" should be re-evaluated in cooperation with the labs. The number of "lead" areas per lab may need to be limited.

2) A more equitable distribution of work among labs be determined in collaboration with them.

3) OERI should take a more active and collaborative role in implementing Task Five activities, ideally by having each member of the OERI Laboratory team serve as a liason/facilitator for a theme area.

4) The institutional liaisons would have responsibility for generating collaborative efforts across OERI and the Department.

5) Products developed under Task Five should be disseminated nationally through a variety of educational agencies.

6) Meetings among OERI staff and lab staff should continue as necessary to reach these objectives.

The panel endorses the general intent of these recommendations. It suggests that, in addition, further thought be given to the incentives, or lack thereof, for labs to participate in Task Five as presently implemented. The panel also believes that the responsibility for success of Task Five is shared by OERI and the labs. While the labs need to live up to the spirit of the contract requirements, OERI will need to take strong central leadership if the potential in this area is to be realized.

Public and private education- With one exception, the team reports did not highlight the degree of services being provided to private education. The panel does not have enough information in this area of the program to comment knowledgeably.

The panel believes that service to private schools is of greater significance in some regions than others and that the interests of individual labs in it should be guided by their regional characteristics and governing boards. (Private school officials are among various types of educators the 1985 RFP recommended for consideration in board membership.) The panel also believes the labs should be sensitive to the needs of intermediary organizations (i.e., through indirect service strategies) serving private education. Among these these organizations are those serving specific populations, such as the Association of Tribal-Controlled Schools.

Regulation of the Labs- The panel is interested in the efficiency and productivity of the organizational and contractual relationships between the labs and OERI. Among the topics in which it is specifically interested are the following:

- The degree of specificity in the lab contracts. The panel believes that the specificity of contracts emphasizes process at the expense of (1) a concept of overall lab role (2) substantive emphasis (3) vision of successful service and (4) indicators of success.

- The panel believes the degree of reporting required by OERI may be excessive. But given that, it is still possible, as suggested in the discussion of clarity and vision of the labs' mission, the labs write too much in response to the OERI requirements. A greater balance in reporting requirements between the need for detailed accountability and programmatic clarity needs to be sought.

- The panel believes there is an inherent conflict between the greater degree of control and specificity appropriately demanded in contracts and the autonomy lodged in the concept of regional labs. The panel is aware of the previous discussions about this subject. It believes that the potential for use of cooperative agreements in the future in the program is worthy of investigation. But for the moment, the panel would have to conclude that the ideal procurement mechanism for use in the program does not exist.

Relationship Between OERI and non-OERI activities- The panel is aware that labs differ greatly in the extent to which they have non-OERI funding. The implications of this deserve attention. These include:

- Laboratories differ greatly in their entrepreneurial behavior as regards non-OERI funding. Some of the more mature ones have sizable proportions and amounts of such funding. On the one hand, this reflects organizational health and vitality. The panel is concerned, however, that such labs may be shifting valued staff and other resources as necessary to compete for and conduct such services at the expense of the OERI-funded work.

- The panel is concerned that OERI may, unintentionally, be subsidizing labs to compete with other organizations for other OERI and non-OERI work. Labs may be afforded an advantage in competitions because of their relatively better-developed institutional capacity and accumulated abililty to tap other resources. The panel recognizes that the OERI contracts do not have that purpose and it is not OERI's intent to afford labs unfair advantage when competing for funds. Some means to ensure that this is not the case, however, or other resolution of this matter, may nonetheless be appropriate.

- The panel is aware that newer labs without other sources of funding or cash reserves face unique needs regarding their cash flow. The panel believes that OERI should be responsive to such needs.

Organizational maturity- An issue somewhat related to that of OERI and non-OERI activities is that of organizational maturity. The labs vary widely on this dimension. The older ones have been in existence for some twenty years, the newer ones for two to three years. The following considerations, therefore, are worthy of attention regarding the labs' varying organizational maturity.

- The panel believes the older labs might productively assist the younger ones on a selective basis in either governance, organization and managment, or programmatic areas. OERI staff have cited examples of how such intra-lab assistance has occurred. This is praiseworthy. The panel believes, however, that such assistance might be extended. Older labs might particularly take the lead in collaboration under Task Five.

- With all labs, but perhaps the older ones in particular, there is a need to obtain staff to deal with new and unfolding educational areas (e.g., higher order thinking skills), or retrain existing staff to deal with them. The panel recognizes the need for stability in personnel administration of a lab and for some continuity in staffing. On the other hand, stability and continuity will not always meet challenges in new areas. The panel has heard a concern that labs may be entering into fields where they do not have adequate staff expertise, nor plans to acquire that expertise. The panel recommends that the labs' capacity to adapt staffing to meet changes required in their mission and clients' needs be examined. Specific factors to be examined include policies for providing new staff, as required, and providing staff development for existing staff. Staff development can and should be a vital part of each laboratory's overall personnel program.

Lab-specific matters- The panel will depart here from its focus on program-wide matters to comment on a few matters related to individual labs. The labs referred to are the newer ones. These comments are made in part because they relate to the specific labs and in part because they exemplify the sorts of issues which may face new institutions generally. They are thus relevant to the 1990 recompetition.

The reports on the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory reflect many strengths in the institution. They also reflect struggles the lab has gone through to achieve stability. These include marginally adequate faciltities (which are now being substantially renovated), turnover in management and cash flow problems related to Departmental payment procedures. (The lab did, however, have financial reserves available to it from a predecessor organization which prevented dire consequences from occurring due to the cash flow problems).

The present executive director of the lab asserts that the turnover in management has not adversely affected it. Whatever the case in that regard, the panel believes that for a newer institution with such a history, OERI should continue to monitor the situation carefully. Two rather different monitoring postures are appropriate. One is to encourage and support appropropriate growth of the lab. The other, however, is to counsel moderation in aspirations, if necessary, so that the lab's programmatic reach does not exceed its organizational and managerial grasp.

The Southeast Educational Improvement Laboratory has had cash flow problems. These were largely due to its new status as a lab without any existing cash reserves to fall back upon. Difficulties in attaining a satisfactory payment mechanism experienced with the Department's contracts and finance offices have exacerbated the laboratory's cash flow problems during its initial period. The panel is pleased to note that these problems appear near resolution. The panel encourages close attention by OERI management to any similar situations in the future.

The Regional Laboratory for the Northeast and Islands grew out of a pre-existing organization and is implementing a novel structure for providing service. State assistance centers have been established through existing organizations on a decentralized basis as a means to provide a substantial portion of the laboratory's services. The panel has heard arguments for and against the efficacy of this strategy. It has two observations to make in this regard.

The first observation is that the lab is implementing a strategy which was clearly included in its winning proposal in 1985. Any uncertainty, or even unease, with the novel characteristics of this strategy ought not, therefore to be turned into premature judgments about its success. The second observation is that, notwithstanding its contractual validity, enough experience has been gained with the strategy to warrant a special activity to explore its progress and prospects. The panel therefore recommends that the lab be requested to jointly convene such an activity with OERI during the first six months of the new program year. The activity would examine the operation of the strategy to date,

reactions to it from the field and possible future directions for it. Representatives of various lab constituents and clients, plus others with the potential to contribute to the discussion, would be invited to participate. The panel would follow the course of this activity closely.

III. Recommendations Regarding the Future of the Program

The panel has a responsibility to make recommendations covering the longer term of the lab program, as well as immediate considerations arising from the external review. A focal point for these longer term considerations is policies relevant to the recompetition of the labs scheduled for 1990 and administration of the program thereafter.

The panel makes the following recommendations at this time. They are stimulated by discussion of this review. They are not, however, necessarily derived from the review in every aspect. The panel members bring broad and diverse perspectives to the task of school improvement and labs. The recommendations below in part reflect those perspectives.

Make the programmatic realities and the contractual requirements compatible-

The panel recognizes the need for OERI, or any funding agency, to be accountable for administration of its contracts. On the other hand, labs are engaged in work which, by definition, is client-driven to a considerable degree and thus changing in nature. The present contract requirements appear to impose an unrealistic degree of precision upon labs in stating in advance what they plan to do, at least for "outyears", or those beyond the current and next ones.

The panel has addressed this issue earlier in this report. It recommends here that further study of desirable procurement procedures for new awards to labs be explored as an integral aspect of planning for the recompetition itself.

Strengthen Departmental program administration-

The panel has not sought to examine the operations of the Department's Grants and Contracts Service (GCS) in support of the labs. It has no reason to believe that Departmental procurement regulations are not being followed in the lab contracts. Nonetheless, it has heard reports of slowness in resolving cash flow problems and slow approval of other lab requests.

Just as the panel has counseled attention by labs to basic matters of management and organization, the panel counsels OERI to take whatever action is possible to strengthen the contract administration of this program. In addition to seeking additional staffing in the relevant GCS unit, OERI might take one additional step. It is to have institutional liaisons (IL's) gain maximum advantage of the powers which are lodged in their designation as the "Contracting Officer's Technical Representative" (COTR). The panel is aware that some Government agencies delegate considerably more discretion to their program officers

having that designation than does GCS. The panel strongly believes that appropriate training of IL's in their COTR role is desirable.

The panel also notes that IL's are overburdened with administrative details. Such details are inappropriate for their role as senior staff and also hinder their addressing larger programmatic issues. Designation of junior staff to apprentice two or three IL's is desirable. Apprentices could both assist IL's with their administrative work and prepare to assume IL responsibilties when staff vacancies occur. Such staffing would also ensure that there would be adequate back-up knowledge about a lab and its region in the absence of the IL.

Further examine the fiscal requirements of establishing and operating a lab-

The panel has been struck by the vastly different degree of overall financial resources available to individual labs, particularly some comparisons between older ones and newer ones. Attention should be given to ways that labs' cash flow needs may be met. On the one hand, labs should not be required to endure financial hardship. On the other hand, they should not over-aggresively seek other sources of funds, possibly at the expense of OERI-funded activities or the labs' own sense of self-identity. The panel strongly recommends that consideration be given to including fees in any future contracts. Such fees are a reasonable way to develop reserves to meet unexpected needs and are in fact consistent with the contractual relationship between the department and the labs.

Examine the "entrepreneurial" behavior of the labs-

The panel believes the behavior of labs with large amounts of non-OERI funding is in fact a significant determinant of their overall institutional behavior. The panel recognizes that OERI is only accountable for conduct of work it funds, but it is not possible in every instance to understand performance of OERI-funded work without understanding the broader environment.

The panel recommends that this "entrepreneurial" aspect of labs, specifically how it affects OERI-funded work, be studied prior to the recompetition. Such a study would address patterns of seeking non-OERI-funded work by labs, the amounts and types conducted and the distribution of available resources within a lab between OERI-funded and non-OERI-funded work.

Clarify the paperwork in the program-

The combined requirements for paperwork imposed on the labs by the Department's contracts office and OERI are very large. Still, some labs seem to have gone beyond the bounds of what even OERI required in their submission of documents for this review.

For the recompetition, documentation must be submitted in sufficient detail to allow a valid and reliable review process to be conducted. For program administration, adequate documentation also needs to be

submitted. But as indicated earlier, the panel believes the amount of documentation submitted in connection with this review may have actually obscured some larger vision of what the labs are doing. Clearer, more succinct documentation is possible in this program and should be encouraged.

Study the implications of the indirect services ("with and through") strategy-

The panel is impressed with the degree to which the labs have sought to implement this strategy. It has had major effects on the character and programs of many of the institutions.

Still, there are many unanswered questions about the best way to implement this strategy and its implications. Among these questions are the most appropriate groups with whom to work "with and through", the effects of not serving some groups, the degree, if any, to which this strategy should be imbued in all the labs' work and appropriate ways to evaluate labs' performance working in this mode.

A forthcoming field study appears to offer one opportunity to examine at least some of these issues. The strategy and its implications should be studied thoroughly prior to commencing the recompetition.

Re-examine the assumptions underlying needs assessments

The panel is not convinced the extensive needs assessments are adequately serving their intended purpose of guiding programmatic planning within the regions. On the one hand, there is too much data. On the other hand, the data do not always adequately track planning decisions and the allocation of services actually made. The panel recommends that the possibility of shorter needs assessments be explored, also that greater visibility be given to labs' unpublished bases for making decisions.

More coordination is needed-

The panel commends OERI and the labs for the efforts taken to coordinate activities among labs. But much more can and should be done. Within OERI, better coordination of the IL's activities can be accomplished. Better coordination of the lab program with other OERI-funded activities is particularly desirable.

The labs can improve coordination among themselves and with other parties. As indicated earlier in this report, the panel does not believe that the labs are benefiting from such coordination of their activities to the extent they and their clients might.

Further study of this issue is desirable. It should include analysis of the successes and failures of the present coordination provision in the contracts (Task Five), but not be bound by the present contractual provisions. OERI should specifically study the potential for labs to further coordinate their work with the other Federally-funded assistance institutions listed in Table 1.

Study the future of services to the Pacific Basin Region-

The panel is aware that the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory is providing services to the Pacific Basin Region. This region covers a vast area, ranging from Hawaii in the east to Pacific territories in the west. The area is strategically important, both educationally and otherwise.

The area was designated a separate region in the 1985 recompetition of the laboratories. The Northwest lab was assigned to help the region develop full-service capacity to operate its own lab by the close of this contract period, as well as to provide services to it.

The panel is not in a position to comment on the level or adequacy of services provided to the region by the Northwest lab, or the degree of progress made in preparing the region to have its own lab. Nonetheless, it strongly recommends that OERI study the future direction of lab services to this region prior to commencing the 1990 recompetition.

More examination of the programs in the field is needed-

The panel recommends that in the future, evaluations of whatever sort (monitors' visits, external reviews, studies, etc.), should seek to get more information from the people in the field with whom the labs work and serve. The panel recognizes the fiscal constraints on obtaining such information, i.e. funds for staff travel, reviews and contracted studies. It nonetheless encourages OERI to get as much "grass-roots" evidence as possible to ensure that a clear and concise picture of how well the labs are working is obtained.